South Africa for connoisseurs – right in the heart of paradise!

We arrive in Johannesburg, full of excitement. South Africa at last, the bushland at last! It's February and we're glad to be leaving cold and wet Germany behind. Here in South Africa it's around 35 degrees; it's sunny, hot and dry. We've arrived – well, almost. We pick up the hire car and set off on our adventure – driving on the left. After a few kilometres, you get used to drivers coming towards you from the right and carry on straight ahead along the fairly quiet road. You also get used quite quickly to the 'saying thank you' in South Africa: you overtake, thank them by flashing your hazard lights, and receive a polite 'please' from the driver behind in the form of a brief flash of their headlights. To the right and left you can see a few small villages; otherwise, you come across the odd cow by the roadside. There are usually no fences, but the cows have got used to the traffic. After a good 5½ hours, we've almost reached our destination and are hoping to finally catch a glimpse of the lodge. A few kilometres on a gravel track (our car survived!) and up a steep hill, and we're finally here. The long journey is made shorter by the occasional sighting of wildlife to the right and left of the road.

We're immediately greeted with a cool drink and enjoy the beautiful view of the hills and the landscape surrounding the lodge. The lodge is situated slightly higher up, so you can also catch a magnificent view from your room and the terrace.

The holiday can begin! After the long flight and drive, it's time to relax by the pool. We're almost the only guests here today, so it's pleasantly quiet and cosy. The rooms are spacious, lovely and feature a great terrace, so you feel at home straight away. We're starting to get hungry after the long journey and are delighted when our first meal is served in the evening. A four-course menu awaits us with tasty, fresh dishes – an absolute treat! We round off the evening with a glass of wine and fall into bed early, happy and full.
The next morning, the day starts early; it's set to be hot. We set off on our first exploratory ride – Pasha is my companion today. He is even-tempered, easy to ride and happy to be encouraged into the occasional gallop. On the way, we come across a small herd of giraffes that have just had their young. At two months old, they are already quite independent and are already waddling after the larger giraffes.

Eland antelopes and wildebeest keep crossing our path, but they hardly let themselves be disturbed whilst feeding. They are already used to visitors. We've been out for a good two hours and it's already starting to get hotter. By 9.30 we're back at the stables and are driven back to the lodge, where a delicious breakfast awaits us that leaves nothing to be desired: fruit, cheese, sausage, fresh bread and eggs cooked to order – what more could you want?

In the afternoon, we get to choose another activity – my non-riding partner would like to have a go on a horse, and another couple joins us, so we set off on a leisurely walk.

The two men are surprisingly fit after the ride and don't complain of sore muscles (though they did have comfortable trail saddles and a blanket – you can't get much more luxurious than that when riding...).

After the ride, there's still time for a cool dip in the pool before another delicious four-course meal awaits us. From the restaurant, we keep seeing wildebeest or eland grazing – an incredibly peaceful sight of the African bush! Full and content, we fall into bed tonight... after all, mornings in South Africa start very early in summer!

A special morning awaits us – my partner sets off on a bush walk with Chamu, his guide, and two other Germans. Pasha is saddled up for me once more and the three of us set off on a leisurely ride. Time and again we see antelopes, zebras and warthog families crossing our path. In the morning, it's still pleasantly cool for us and the horses, so we can gallop and trot for longer. After an hour and a half, we arrive. We don't yet know exactly where. We dismount, and at the same time the bushwalk group arrives. Only now do we see what awaits us: a lavishly laid table with all manner of delicacies in the middle of the bush. We tuck in and enjoy the pleasant weather before it gets too hot.

After our bush breakfast, we climb back onto our horses and ride back to the stables before taking a short siesta. We still have one big wish: archery! The lodge has plenty of activities on offer, and this is one of them. Naturally, we'd love to give it a go. We

are given a brief instruction and everyone gets a go at hitting the target pinned to a wall a few metres in front of us.
At first, we're just happy if we manage to get anywhere near the target. We have to collect the arrows afterwards, and more than once we spend a bit longer searching because the arrows have flown off in the wrong direction. After a few attempts, we've more or less got the hang of it and even come close to hitting the bullseye! It's great fun, but eventually our arms start to tire and we call it a day.
But the adventures aren't over for today! We've planned a very special outing for this afternoon: a trip to the Amakhosi Big Five Reserve. We have the unique opportunity (there isn't always space there) to go on a game drive and set off with a group of cheerful English people. We've had a lucky day. During the three-hour jeep safari, we see not only giraffes, zebras and plenty of antelopes, but also a large herd of elephants drinking right next to us at a waterhole, and rhinos.

The black rhinos are keeping a low profile, but we spot a few white rhinos grazing and are able to stop quite close to them.

The highlight of the afternoon, however, is the cheetahs we spot: plump and round as balls, they lie panting on the ground, having just eaten, and are taking a nap, full and content.

There are only two cheetahs in the whole reserve, so we are really lucky to catch a glimpse of these wonderful creatures. After this eventful day, we fall into bed exhausted following a delicious dinner.
The next day begins early, as always. Unfortunately, we have to say goodbye today to the beautiful lodge, the lovely hosts, the delicious food and the fantastic horse riding, as we're heading on to Thanda Camp. We drive for about 1½ hours and reach our destination. We can leave our car at the edge of the reserve and are driven to the camp. The camp is impressive – a tented camp, but what a camp!

Comfortable tents with everything you could wish for: a cosy large bed, a bathroom in a separate tent with a connecting door, an outdoor shower and a beautiful terrace, onto which the odd antelope strays. Plus a large pool, a bar and a restaurant. And all of this right in the middle of the bush!

Early in the morning, we set off on a safari at 5 am, and the rangers know exactly what they're doing. We follow the tracks of elephants until we see them crossing the road right in front of us: a large bull elephant and several calves, passing quite close to our jeep. They aren't bothered by us. We continue on a lion hunt. And suddenly the jeep stops, reverses a little, and our ranger points to the left: we all stare spellbound into the thicket as we catch sight of a very rare guest crouching in the bush: a leopard. We enjoy the sight for a few seconds before it dashes off at breakneck speed.

This safari takes us from one highlight to the next. The rangers continue to search for traces of lions when, suddenly, a lion leaps from a tree a few metres in front of us and strides gracefully onto the track right before our eyes. He had been keeping watch for the pride to warn them of danger and is now joining his fellow lions. Seeing these majestic animals so close up is truly a wonderful experience!
On the way back, we come across a huge herd of buffalo that has made itself comfortable in the water to cool off.

Back at the camp, the next highlight is already waiting for us: a cosy meal in the boma. A boma is a circular open-air area, usually with a campfire in the middle. There we sit comfortably at tables for two, very romantic and secluded. We are entertained by a traditional group of local women who sing and dance for us. Afterwards, there is a delicious buffet with something for everyone. An absolute treat for the taste buds. And so an eventful day comes to an end.

Our verdict on the stay: a brilliant mix of lovely horse rides, great accommodation, warm hosts and first-class food!

You can find all the information at:
http://www.equitour.com/paksta.htm
at http://www.equitour.com/pak009.htm (2 nights at Thanda Camp) and at http://www.equitour.com/pab008.htm (one night at Amakhosi Lodge).

February 2016, Angelika Kaiser